

# She and Allan *By Sir H. Rider Haggard*

"In the darkness of that holy place once more before me in her glory stood the Goddess Isis. In her great eyes were scorn and anger. 'O Ayesha' she cried sternly 'thou hast broken thine oath.'"



## CHAPTER XIII.

### Allan Hears a Strange Tale

YES, there she sat in her white robes and veil, the point and centre of a little lake of light, a wondrous, and, in a sense, a spiritual vision, for in truth there was something about her which was not of the world, something that drew and yet frightened me.

Still as a statue she sat, like one to whom time is of no account and who has grown weary of motion, and on either side of her yet more still, like caryatides supporting a shrine, stood two of the stately women who were her attendants.

She spoke no word, yet I knew she was inviting me to come nearer and moved forward till I reached a curious carved chair that was placed just beneath the dais, and there halted, not liking to sit down without permission.

For a long while she contemplated me, for as before I could feel her eyes searching me from head to foot and, as it were, looking through me as though she would discover my very soul. Then at length she moved, waving those two ivory arms of hers outwards with a kind of swimming stroke, whereon the women to right and left of her turned and glided away, I know not whither.

"Sit, Allan," she said, "and let us talk, for I think we have much to say to each other. Have you slept well? And eaten, though I fear that the food is but rough? Also, was the bath made ready for you?"

"Yes, O Ayesha," I answered to all three questions, adding, for I knew not what to say, "it seems to be a very ancient bath."

"When last I saw it," she replied, "it was well enough, with statues standing round it worked by a sculptor who had seen beauty in his dreams. But in two thousand years, or is it more?—the tooth of time bites deep and doubtless like all else in this dead place it is now a ruin."

I coughed to cover up the exclamation of disbelief that rose to my lips and remarked blandly that two thousand years was certainly a long time.

"When you say one thing, Allan, and mean another your Arabic is even more vile than usual and does not serve to cloak your thought."

"It may be so, O Ayesha, for I only know that tongue as I do many

other of the dialects of Africa by learning it from common men. My own speech is English, in which, if you are acquainted with it I should prefer to talk."

"I know not English, which doubtless is some language that has arisen since I left the world. Perhaps by and by you shall teach it to me, but I tell you, you anger me, whom it is not well to anger, because you believe nothing that passes my lips, and yet do not dare to say so."

"How can I believe one, O Ayesha, who, if I understand aright, speaks of having seen a certain bath two thousand years ago, whereas one hundred years are man's utmost days? Forgive me therefore if I cannot believe what I know to be untrue."

"Now I thought that she would be very angry and was sorry that I had spoken. But as it happened she was not.

"You must have courage to give me the lie so boldly, and I like courage," she said, "who have been cringing to for so long. Indeed, I know that you have who have heard how you bore yourself in the fight yesterday, and much else about you. I think that we shall be friends, but—seek no more."

"What else should I seek, O Ayesha?" I asked, innocently.

"Now you are lying again," she said, "who know well that no man who is a man sees a woman who is beautiful and pleases him, without wondering, should he desire it if she could come to love him, that is, if she be young."

"Which at least is not possible when she has seen two thousand years, after which time naturally she would prefer to wear a veil," I said, boldly, seeking to avoid the argument into which I saw she wished to drag me.

"Ah!" she answered, "the little yellow man who is named Light-in-Darkness put that thought into your heart. I think. Oh! do not trouble as to how I know it who have many spies here, as he guessed well enough. So a woman who has lived two thousand years must be hideous and wrinkled, must she? The stamp of youth and loveliness must long have fled from her; of that you, the wise man, are sure. Very well. Now you tempt me to do what I had determined I would not do, and you shall pluck the fruit of the tree of curiosity which grows so fast within you. Look, O Allan, and say whether I

am old and hideous, even though I have lived two thousand years upon the earth and mayhap many more."

Then she lifted her hands and did something to her veil, so that for a moment, only one moment, her face was revealed, after which the veil fell into its place.

I looked, I saw, and if that chair had lacked a back I believe that I should have fallen out of it to the ground. "As for what I saw—well, it cannot be described, at any rate by me, except perhaps as a flash of glory."

Every man has dreamed of perfect beauty, basing his ideas of it perhaps on that of some woman he has met who has changed to a fancy, with a few accessories from splendid pictures of Greek statues thrown in, plus a garnishment of the imagination. At any rate I have, and here was that perfect beauty multiplied by ten, such beauty, that, at the sight of it the senses reeled. And yet I repeat that it is not to be described. I do not know what the nose or the lips were like, in fact, all that I can remember with distinctness is the splendor of the eyes, of which I had caught some hint through her veil on the previous night.

Oh! they were wondrous, those eyes, but I cannot tell their color save that the groundwork of them was black. Moreover, they seemed to be more than eyes as we understand them. They were indeed windows of the soul, out of which looked thought and mastery and infinite wisdom, mixed with all the allurements and the mystery that we are accustomed to see or to imagine in woman.

Here let me say something at once. If this marvellous creature expected that the revelation of her splendor was going to make me her slave, to cause me to fall in love with her, as it is called, well, she must have been disappointed, for it had no such effect. It frightened and in a sense humbled me, that is all, for I felt myself to be in the presence of something that was not human, something alien to me as a man, which I could fear and even adore as humanity would adore what is Divine, but with which I had no desire to mix.

Moreover, was it divine, or was it something very different? I did not know, I only knew that it was not for me, as soon should I have thought of asking for a star to set within my lantern.

I think that she felt this, felt that her stroke was missed, as the French say that is if she meant to strike at me at this moment, of which I am not certain, for it was in a changed voice, one with a suspicion of chill in it, that she said with a little laugh:

"Do you admit now, O Allan, that a woman may be old and still remain fair and unwrinkled?"

"I admit," I answered, although I was trembling so much that I could hardly speak with steadiness, "that a woman may be splendid and lovely beyond anything that the mind of man can conceive, whatever her age may be, of which I know nothing, and I would add this, O Ayesha, that I thank you very much for having revealed to me the glory that is hid beneath your veil."

"Why?" she asked, and I thought that I detected curiosity in her question.

"For this reason, O Ayesha. That now there is no fear of my troubling you in such a fashion as you seemed to dread a little while ago. As soon would a man desire to court the moon sailing in her silver loveliness through heaven."

"The moon! It is strange that you should compare me to the moon," she said musingly. "Do you know that the moon was a great goddess in Old Egypt, and that her name was Isis—and well, once I had to do with Isis? Perhaps you were there and knew it, since more lives than one are given to most of us. I must search and learn. For the rest, all have not thought as you do, Allan. Many, on the contrary, love and seek to win the Divine."

"So do I at a distance, O Ayesha, but to come too near to it I do not presume, knowing that I might be consumed."

"You have wisdom," she replied, not without admiration. "The moths are few that fear the flame, but those are the moths which live. Also I think that you have scorched your wings before and learned that fire hurts. Indeed, now I remember that I have heard of three such fires through which you have flown, though all of them are dead ashes now or burn elsewhere. Two were in your youth, and one of them died to save you, a great woman that, is it not so? And the third,

ah! she was a fire indeed, though she burnt with a copper hue. What was her name? I cannot remember, but I think it had something to do with the wind, yes, with the wind when it wails."

I stared at her. Was this Ma-meena myth to be dug up again here in a secret place in the heart of Africa? And how the deuce did she know anything about her? Could she have been pumping Hans or Umslopogaas? No, it was not possible, for she had never seen them out of my presence.

"Perhaps," she went on in a mocking voice, "perhaps once again your disbelief, O Allan, whose cynic mind is so hard to open to new truths. Well, shall I show you the faces of these three? I can," and she waved her hand toward some object that stood on a tripod to the right of her in the shadow—it looked like a crystal basin.

"But what is the use when you know them so well and would only think that I drew their pictures out of your own soul? Also perchance but one face would appear, and that one strange to you. Have you heard, O Allan, that among the wise some hold that not all of us is visible here on earth at once within the same house of flesh?"

I shook my head blankly, for I had never heard anything of the sort.

"You still have much to learn, O Allan, although there are some think you wise," she went on in the same mocking voice. "Well, I hold that this doctrine is built upon a rock of truth; also," she added, after studying me for a minute, "that these three women do not complete the circle. I think there is a fourth who as yet is strange to you in this life, though you have known her well enough in others."

I groaned, imagining that she alluded to herself, which was foolish for me, for at once she read my mind and went on with a rather acid little laugh.

"No, no, not the humble slave who sits before you, whom you have informed me it would please you to reject as unworthy were she brought to you in offering, as in the old days was done at the courts of the great kings of the East. O fool, fool! who hold your-

self so strong and do not know that if I chose, before you shadow had moved a handbreadth, I could bring you to my feet, praying that you might be suffered to kiss my robe, yes, just the border of my robe."

"Then I beg of you not to choose, O Ayesha, since I think that when there is work to be done by both of us we shall find more comfort side by side than if I were on the ground seeking to kiss a robe that doubtless then it would delight you to snatch away."

At these words her whole attitude seemed to change. I could see her lovely shape brace itself up, as it were, beneath her robes, and felt in some way that her mind had also changed, that it had rid itself of mockery and woman's pique, and like a shifting searchlight, was directed upon some new objective.

"Work to be done," she repeated after me in a new voice. "Yes, I thank you who bring it to my mind since the hours pass and that work presses. Also I think there is a bargain to be made between us, who are both of the blood that keeps bargains, even if they be not written on a roll and signed and sealed. Why do you seek of me, O Allan, Watcher-in-the-Night?"

Now I hesitated, as what I had to tell her seemed so foolish—indeed, so insane—while she waited patiently as though to give me time to shape my thoughts. Speaking at last because I must, I said:

"I come to ask you, O Ayesha, to show me the dead, if the dead still live elsewhere."

"And who told you, O Allan, that I could show you the dead, if they are not truly dead? There is but one, I think, and if you are his messenger, show me his token, for without it we do not speak together of this business."

"What token?" I asked, innocently, though I guessed her meaning well enough.

She searched me with her great eyes, for I felt, and indeed, saw them on me through the veil, then answered:

"I think—nay, let me be sure, and, half rising from the couch, she bent her head over the tripod that I have described, and stared into what seemed to be a bowl of

crystal. "If I read aright," she said, straightening herself presently, "it is a hideous thing enough, the carving of an abortion of a man such as no woman would care to look on, lest her babe should bear its stamp; a charmed thing also that has virtues for him who wears it, especially for you, O Allan, since something tells me that it is dyed with the blood of one who loved you. If you have it, let it be revealed, since without it I do not talk with you of your dead."

Now I drew the talisman from its hiding-place and held it toward her.

"Give it me," she said.

I was about to obey when something seemed to warn me not to do so.

"Nay," I answered, "He who lent me this carving for a while charged me that except in emergency to save others I must wear it night and day till I returned it to his hand, saying that if I parted from it fortune would desert me."

"Draw near," she said, "and let me look. Man, be not afraid."

She took the talisman in her hand and examined it closely.

"I have heard of this charm and it is true that the thing has power," she said, "for I can feel it running through my veins; also that it is a shield of defence to him who wears it. Yes, and now I understand what perplexed me somewhat, namely, how it came about that you vexed me into unveiling—but let that matter be. The wisdom was not your own, but another's, that is all. Yet, the wisdom of one whose years have borne him beyond the shafts that fly from woman's eyes, the ruinous shafts that bring men to doom and nothingness. Tell me, Allan, is this the likeness of him who gave it you?"

"Yes, O Ayesha, the very picture, as I think, carved by himself, though he said that it is ancient, and others tell that it has been known in the land for centuries."

"So perchance has he," she answered drily, "since some of our company live long. Now tell me this wizard's name. Nay, wait awhile, for I would prove that indeed you are his messenger with

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